



# Building a Strong and Vibrant VCSE Sector in North Devon and Torrige Project

## Year 1 External Evaluation Report

August 2025



one northern devon



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the Year 1 external evaluation of the *Building a Strong and Vibrant VCSE Sector in North Devon and Torridge* project, funded by the National Lottery. The evaluation runs for 2.5 years with the evaluators acting as a learning partner to the project team, supporting the embedding of reflective practice, developing an evaluation framework, and ensuring effective use of resources.

### **Year 1 Activities**

The focus in Year 1 was establishing a clear evaluation framework, simplifying outcomes, and creating tools for reporting and reflection and supporting the team to engage with these and incorporate learning and reflection into the project.

External evaluators supported the project team to embed continuous learning, improve reporting processes and align activities with project objectives. External evaluation activities included baseline surveys, workshops, interviews, case study reviews, stakeholder engagement and development of a Theory of Change.

### **Key Findings**

#### **Engaging Communities:**

- Project staff and Community Developers/Connectors (CD/CCs) successfully built relationships and consulted within their communities.
- CD/CCs delivered activities to meet identified needs, aimed at improving wellbeing, reducing isolation and strengthening community spirit; some of these activities are now run and delivered by the local community.
- Some challenges were identified in reaching youth voices and Global Majority voices but the development of the 'quiet voices' approach has enhanced this area of work and all the team have increasingly centralised this within the work.
- One Communities local groups are seen as one way of bringing people together to build relationships and collaborate.
- The long-term timescales for community development are at odds with the short project length. There is sometimes a tension between community development activity in listening, engaging and building trusted relationships, with the need for evidencing impact that aligns with statutory partners expectations.

#### **Learning and Improving Practice:**

- The project has developed its reflective practice; and training and peer networks have enhanced staff confidence and role clarity.
- Data collection and reporting processes continue to need some streamlining to strengthen consistency and evidence and reduce the administrative burden on part-time staff.

- There was evidence of changed approaches following trialling activities, to improve attendance or to better meet the needs of attendees.

### **Strengthening the VCSE Sector:**

- The project has improved organisational capacity, and volunteer support for OCs and some local VCSE organisations.
- Training has been delivered in a range of areas, and resources and materials promoting volunteering have been developed through the project.
- Team members have facilitated a several strategic partnerships and cross-sector networks improving collaboration.
- Funding pressures, volunteer shortages and governance challenges remain significant risks to sustainability for local VCSE organisations.

### **Influencing Systems:**

- Project staff have participated in strategic forums, some of which are now including key players and are seen as valuable for community development.
- There were examples where community intelligence has started to shape statutory services and partnerships, but progress is uneven due to structural barriers, such as short-term funding cycles, geographic isolation, power imbalances with statutory services and differing objectives.
- Developing clear, functioning routes for community voices to consistently influence statutory agendas and spending requires more time and further exploration.

### **Key Recommendations for Year 2**

- Strengthen representation by targeting underrepresented groups, particularly young people, marginalised communities and quiet voices – using a range of engagement and participation techniques. This includes challenging OC groups to incorporate wider representation.
- Share stories of successful engagement to internal and external audiences to demonstrate the importance of this approach.
- Continue to focus on reflective practice and peer learning within the project, and widen this approach to knowledge sharing and collaboration across the wider VCSE sector. Establish ‘learning loops’ throughout the project.
- Prioritise fewer initiatives that align with wider priorities and funding opportunities, and are community led – to enable CD/CCs to focus and be less pulled by competing agendas.

- Continue to develop strategic and partnership approaches – ensuring that the voices of local communities (particularly those less often heard) have routes to influence statutory priorities and spending.
- Redesign reporting templates to align with the four revised objectives and build staff capacity in evaluation, whilst reducing pressure on staff time to complete administrative and evaluation tasks.
- Continue to develop the evidence base, using mixed-method evidence and case studies to demonstrate the difference community development approaches make within communities, and to influence statutory services and secure investment.

Year 1 of the Project has laid some strong foundations for a reflective, evidence-driven approach to community development. The project is already building capacity, confidence, and collaboration across North Devon and Torridge. In Year 2, stronger inclusion of underrepresented voices, evaluation and evidence optimisation, plus a sharper focus on influence and sustainability will be key to achieving lasting Project impact.

## INTRODUCTION

This external evaluation report brings together evaluation data and analysis of the National Lottery funded *Building a Strong and Vibrant VCSE Sector in North Devon and Torridge* Project. External evaluation<sup>1</sup> for the Project began in September 2024 and runs for 2.5 years.

The agreed purpose of the external evaluators is to act as a learning partner throughout the early and ongoing stages of the project, providing structured guidance on effective learning and evaluation processes. In Year 1 this has included advising the Project team on data reporting, ways of embedding reflective practice, developing an evaluation framework, supporting with Project objectives and intended outcomes, and carrying out external evaluation processes. The external evaluation is designed to complement and support the work of the internal Impact Evaluator and Project team, ensuring that project resources are used effectively and that learning was embedded from the outset.

This report outlines the external evaluation activities, findings from analysis of the data gathered by the external evaluators, key learnings and recommendations for Year 2 of the Project.

## EXTERNAL EVALUATION ACTIVITIES AND DELIVERABLES – YEAR 1

A significant initial focus in Year 1 involved collaboratively establishing a clear Project evaluation framework, workable Project outcomes and measurable indicators for the work of the CDs and CCs. This included developing suitable tools and building staff confidence and capability to engage with, and benefit from, ongoing evaluation. Rather than the evaluation being a ‘tick box’ activity, we worked with the Project team to develop opportunities and frameworks for continuous reflection, learning and adaptation.

Recognising the long-term nature of community development, the evaluation framework that we developed recommended ways of reporting and tracking shorter-term outcome measures and indicators, whilst acknowledging that the most significant impact will emerge over time. We supported the Project team to be able to evidence Project activities, outcomes and impact in order for them to develop reflective practice, identify best practice and assess sustainability of community development. This approach has helped to support the process and outcomes of the Project in relation to building relationships, skills and confidence within the community and with stakeholders. The specific work undertaken by the external evaluators is outlined below.

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<sup>1</sup> The external evaluation contract was awarded to Clarity CIC and Research Your Way Ltd, and has been funded through match-funding with a budget of £15k over 2.5 years.

## **Engagement**

- Project Meetings (9)
- 1:1 Evaluation Conversations with Core Team (14)
- Evaluation Conversations at Events (5)
- Meetings with External Stakeholders/Advisors (4)
- Evaluation Workshop with Community Developers (CD) and Connectors (CC) (1)
- Evaluation Meetings with Internal Impact Officer (3)
- National Lottery Reporting Meetings (2)

## **Activities and Deliverables**

- Review of project set-up data held and current processes
- Development of CD/CC Reporting Tool to fit with Intended Outcomes and National Occupational Standards for CC/CD
- Development of feedback form templates for CC/CDs to use to collect evaluation data for events/activities
- Development of Evaluation Framework (full and summarised versions)
- Evidence Review of Relevant Community Development Initiatives
- Delivery of Report on Relevant Community Development Initiatives
- Reviews of CD/CC Reporting and Case Studies
- External Evaluation Survey Analysis Report and Recommendations
- Support with simplifying Project Outcomes and ensuring they fit with evaluation tools
- Development of Theory of Change
- Delivery of Year 1 External Evaluation Report

## **External Evaluation Data Collection and Analysis**

- CD/CC Baseline Survey (8 responses)
- One Community Baseline Survey (16 responses)
- North Devon Leadership Survey (12 responses)
- End of Year 1 CD/CC Survey (5 responses)
- Feedback Questions for Core Staff (3 responses)
- Ripple Mapping Workshop with CC/CDs, Internal Evaluator, 1 Partner

## EVALUATION FINDINGS

The Internal Year 1 Project Report outlines the progress of the Project throughout the year, giving detailed information about Project activities and key learnings – the summary of activities is provided in Figure 1. This external evaluation report does not duplicate the content of that report, rather we focus on the findings of the external evaluation methods and processes, presenting these in close alignment with the newly revised Project Objectives.

**Figure 1. Year 1 Project Activity Summary**



A Project Evaluation Framework was developed by the external evaluators. This suggested useful techniques for ensuring robust evaluation of the Project in Year 1:

1. Social Network Analysis : identify strengths and gaps in partnerships.
2. Gap & Equity Analysis: assess inclusivity and effectiveness of engagement.
3. Comparative & Contribution Analysis: measure project impact over time.
4. Thematic Analysis: identify best practices from case studies and reports.
5. Sustainability Assessment: determine long-term viability beyond funding

The Project team has made progress on 1, 2 and 4, as is evidenced in the Year 1 Project Report (even if these terms are not always directly used). A lot of work has been carried out in communities by Project staff during Year 1 which is aligned with the aim and objectives of the Project. Evaluation data has been reported, collated and assessed by Project staff and then reviewed by the external evaluators. In Year 2, there is a need to build on these practises by ensuring outcome evidence is collected uniformly across all areas and always analysed with the Project aim and revised objectives in mind. This will enable 3 and 5 (above) to be achieved (this is outlined further in the final report sections).

## EVALUATION FINDINGS FROM PROJECT-REPORTED DATA

### ALIGNMENT OF YEAR 1 PROJECT OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES WITH PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The outputs and outcomes of the Project work have been reviewed by us and matched against the newly revised Project objectives (see below). The Project Year 1 Report makes it very clear that a huge amount of community work has been carried out by the Project team and there has been a lot of strategic networking as well.

The complexity of the Project's aim and intended outcomes was problematic throughout Year 1 – from the set-up phase right through to report and evaluation but these have now been simplified, with permission from the National Lottery Project Officer. There is now 1 Project aim and 4 project objectives.<sup>2</sup>

Our external evaluation surveys of CD/CCs showed that one of their difficulties was the complexity of reporting and '*paperwork*'. This challenge should be overcome in Year 2 if the reporting form is restructured by the team to align with the 4 Project objectives.

We recommend that the learning that has been highlighted in the substantial Year 1 Project Report, based on the CD/CC and other Project staff monthly reports, is now reviewed tightly

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<sup>2</sup> These are being called Outcomes or Objectives in different reporting processes, so we suggest the team decide on one term.

against the Project objectives and that the contribution of the Project work is clearly defined. This will enable case studies to be developed which contain integrated cases for support – detailed and robust evidence of outcomes directly related to the Project. These will be needed in the presentations and discussions to partners and stakeholders related to future funding.

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## SUMMARY OF PROJECT REPORTED OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES BY PROJECT OBJECTIVE

This section summarises the key findings of the Internal Project Year 1 Report (from Project data collated by the Internal Impact Officer) by the newly revised Project objectives.

### 1. ENGAGING: Listening To & Supporting Communities

This objective focuses on directly involving people in communities to identify priorities, assets, and needs, and supporting them to take collective action.

#### Outputs

- **Events and Workshops:** created and promoted numerous community events, including an in-person awards ceremony, a corporate volunteering talk, quiz nights, wellbeing cafes, repair cafes, creative workshops, tech support tea parties and a theatre production.
- **Direct Engagement:** conducted street engagement, visited projects and community groups and held drop-in advice sessions on topics like finance and cancer support.
- **Surveys and Consultations:** created and distributed community surveys to gather feedback and identify priorities.
- **Promotional Materials:** designed and distributed leaflets, posters, and newsletters to publicise volunteering opportunities, events, and services like Devon Connect, created community noticeboards and social media pages.
- **Community Resources:** established new groups and resources based on identified needs, e.g. community food pantry, and a revitalised carer peer support group.

#### Outcomes

- **Increased Participation:** high attendance and registration for events, workshops, and training. 30+ people attended a sustainability event, 50+ attended a community fair and 85+ attended a wellbeing event.
- **Community Connection and Spirit:** attendees gained new skills, developed social connections, and created peer support networks (e.g., WhatsApp groups). Initiatives

strengthened community spirit, inspired civic participation and reduced social isolation.

- Empowerment and Ownership: community members have taken ownership of projects, such as patients leading wellbeing cafe sessions and school children updating a community noticeboard.
- Awareness and Access: increased community awareness of local services, volunteering opportunities and what matters to the community. Vulnerable people gained access to basic needs like food and a safe social environment.
- Improved Wellbeing: positive feedback from attendees on improved mental wellbeing, confidence, and a sense of pride and connection.

## 2. LEARNING: Improving Practice

This objective is about using insights from community engagement and lived experiences to inform and adapt how the project is delivered.

### Outputs

- Feedback Collection: gathered feedback through event surveys, one-to-one interviews and conversations with participants, and group discussions.
- Data Collation: collated survey results and created reports and presentations of findings.
- Needs Assessment: listened to the needs of groups through management forums, meetings and public events to identify gaps in provision.
- Mapping: conducted mapping of youth groups and community venues to understand the existing landscape of services.

### Outcomes

- Responsive Service Delivery: training and support were adapted to meet the specific needs of the sector (e.g., tailoring a health course to the physical needs of a cohort).
- Informed Decision Making: lived experience from community members was used to inform governance and decision-making processes.
- Insight into Engagement: gained a key insight that corporate partners were more interested in speaking directly with VCSE organisations at networking events.
- Improved Strategy: low attendance at drop-in advice sessions led to a change in approach towards a more targeted, self-referral model.

## 3. STRENGTHENING: Strengthening the VCSE Sector

This objective focuses on building the capacity of voluntary and community organisations, their staff, and their volunteers.

#### Outputs

- **Training and Capacity Building:** delivered and subsidised training courses for VCSE staff and volunteers on topics such as mental health, digital skills, funding applications and food hygiene.
- **Resource Provision:** created a newly designed website with improved navigation and resources, developed a community directory, and provided support for funding applications and bid writing.
- **Networking and Partnerships:** established and facilitated forums for cross-sector collaboration (e.g., mental health network, children/young people forum), hosted networking events for businesses and charities.
- **Volunteer Support:** publicised volunteering opportunities, matched young people with placements, recruited peer supporters and provided support for volunteer enquiries.
- **Direct Organisational Support:** provided organisational development support, connected VCSEs with resources, and helped groups like the Ilfracombe Food Bank secure mental health training for their volunteers.

#### Outcomes

- **Improved Organisational Capacity:** VCSE organisations are better able to access essential information and resources. Staff and volunteers have improved skills and capability, leading to safer and more effective sessions.
- **Stronger Partnerships:** strengthened relationships between corporate and voluntary sectors, sustainability-focused groups, and youth sector organisations.
- **Increased Resources:** organisations successfully secured funding, venues, and volunteers. For example, a youth club was linked with funding opportunities, and a community venue was secured for free use by local groups.
- **Sector Recognition and Efficiency:** raised awareness of the role of volunteers and community groups.

#### 4. INFLUENCING: Influence Statutory Organisations & Strategic Partnerships

This objective involves using community intelligence to effect change in decision-making by statutory bodies, institutions, and wider strategic partnerships.

#### Outputs

- Strategic Engagement: attended and participated in strategic forums and presented findings from community engagement; some Project staff are now taking on external strategic leadership roles.
- Partnership Building: established working relationships with civic leaders, local councils and statutory services.
- Advocacy and Representation: advocated for community needs.
- Emergency Planning: responded to North Devon Council's request for emergency planning support, reinforcing the CVS's role as a strategic partner.

#### Outcomes

- System Change and Service Adaptation: community feedback led directly to service changes. For instance, Devon Carers allocated a new Peer Supporter to an area in response to survey results, and a local councillor pledged to join a Transport Forum following an engagement report.
- Increased Collaboration with Statutory Bodies: increased councillor understanding of community priorities and kickstarted project opportunities with statutory partners. Forged a partnership with the National Trust to provide a community venue for free.
- Secured Political Support: gained the Mayor's support to raise the Pride flag for a full month, promoting inclusion at a civic level.
- Clearer Strategic Role: the Project has sought to clarify the CVS's role as a key strategic infrastructure body, leading to stronger partnerships with corporate and key stakeholders.

#### EVALUATION FINDINGS FROM EXTERNAL EVALUATOR DATA

This section highlights the findings of the external evaluation data analysis by each of the newly revised Project objectives. The findings are based on analysis of data collected from:

- Project Meetings
- 1:1 Evaluation Conversations with Core Team
- Evaluation Conversations at Events
- Meetings with External Stakeholders/Advisors
- Evaluation Workshop with Community Developers (CD) and Connectors (CC)
- Evaluation Meetings with Internal Impact Officer
- National Lottery Reporting Meetings
- CD/CC Baseline Survey
- One Community Baseline Survey

- North Devon Leadership Survey
- End of Year 1 CD/CC Survey
- Feedback Questions for Core Staff
- Ripple Mapping Workshop with CC/CDs
- Review of the Year 1 Strategic Review, Work Record, Project Outputs and Outcomes
- Review of the Draft Year 1 Project Report

Figure 2 provides a short snapshot summary of the key findings by Project objective.

**Figure 2. External Evaluation Key Findings Summary Snapshot**



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## OBJECTIVE 1: LISTENING TO AND SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES

*ENGAGING people in communities of place or shared need to identify priorities, assets, strengths and gaps, and to support them in taking collective relevant action.*

CD/CCs have shown strong commitment to engaging people in communities of place and shared need, employing diverse mixed methods of outreach strategies including informal drop-ins, coffee mornings, peer support groups, chats and short surveys as conversation starters related to people's needs and wants in their communities. These approaches have proved effective in identifying community priorities and building relationships across different demographic groups.

CC/CDs have encountered challenges in their roles related to listening and supporting communities but have reported feeling encouraged and supported through the reflective practice workshops and new CD Network. CDs/CCs report now seeing their roles as a 'bridge or conduit' rather than 'having to do everything'.

*It is important to be flexible and not to take things personally - there will always be 'blockers' and those who are not supportive of what we try to do - ignore them and listen to other people who matter - we are there to support them in every way we can. (CD survey)*

*Knowing when to tap out! Some ideas and projects are just not feasible and time can be wasted. Knowing when to pursue and when to shelve projects is a delicate balance! (CD survey)*

There were clear examples where community voices were directly involved in the design of local projects. This approach enabled community priorities and preferences to directly inform service development, moving beyond consultation to co-design.

Some CDs/CCs have reported a high level of confidence in their ability to represent local perspectives to forums and decision-makers, with responses indicating strong advocacy capabilities and authentic community voice representation.

The Project's embedded reflective practice approach has enabled learning across the community areas, as CDs/CCs have been able to highlight and learn from each other's successful identification and mobilisation of community assets. Recurring and signature community events have been shown to work well in the different areas, such as health and wellbeing initiatives that have successfully united diverse local groups, revealing and building upon existing community assets, whilst also promoting volunteering opportunities. The CD/CCs have been able to take a strategic lead in mapping activities and gaps in provision in some areas.

*I am mapping each group and finding out what their offer is so we know who and what we are signposting to. (CD survey)*

Despite these successes, engaging 'quiet voices' and overcoming 'pride' among potential participants to attend support sessions remains challenging. CD/CCs also identified continued difficulties in building trust and engagement in areas with established, insular community groups, where existing social structures may resist new initiatives or external intervention. These challenges highlight the complex social dynamics that require sustained relationship-building approaches. Partnership working has been shown to be key in some areas.

*Close working relationships with the Health and Wellbeing Team Social Prescribers has been key - learning about the community, the gaps in services and excellent collaborative working on developing projects etc. (CD survey response)*

The work of the Project team in Year 1 has shown that communities want activity rooted in their own priorities rather than projects driven externally. A key learning point has been the importance of establishing clear local priorities and keeping conversations central to the process. In their reports and at Workshops, CDs/CCs highlight that conversations are how gaps are identified, how quieter voices are surfaced and how communities themselves set the agenda for support. For example, new groups such as Crochet circles, Wellbeing Wednesdays, youth development initiatives and family hubs have grown organically from

community interest. Participants in these initiatives described outcomes including reduced loneliness and isolation, increased friendships, and a sense of *'feeling normal'* by being part of activities. Introducing flexible support budgets for CDs, covering training, venue hire, and refreshments, would remove smaller but significant barriers to delivery and enable more responsive engagement with communities.

CD/CCs have reported feeling that the quiet voices method that the team had training on has been particularly successful in helping to ensure less-heard perspectives are captured. Word-of-mouth about the activities has increased participation, while networks have begun adapting to different demographics. Youth voices are starting to be included in community conversations, and this needs to be an area for further development in Year 2.

The Project approach and work of the CD/CCs in Year 1 has shown the benefits of a reflective practice and deep-listening approach. However, data shows that there is still a tendency for CD/CCs to be pulled into the 'doing' of activities and events rather than supporting and facilitating community development.

Analysis of the Project data by the Internal Impact Officer, and presented in the Internal Year 1 Project Report, shows CD/CC Project activity fits into 8 categories:

1. Community Engagement, Insight and Participation
2. Communication and Access
3. Social Support, Inclusion and safety
4. Health and Wellbeing
5. Education, Learning and Employment
6. Culture and Creativity
7. Environment and Sustainability
8. Community Spirit and Identity

The spread of work is understandable given that there is great need and the project staff are driven by a desire to improve people's lives. However, from a strategic Project point of view, 'doing' less and focusing strategically on building community connections and capacity is crucial for the sustainability and legacy of the Project. Deep learning from the findings of the

evaluation of Year 1 will enable refinement of the 'doing' work to match the 4 revised Project objectives. A focus on the overarching purpose of community development enhancement and sustainability is paramount. The new Theory of Change alignment with the simplified Project Objectives can help to steer this strategic decision-making.

The external evaluation survey of One Communities (OCs) suggests that the 'buy-in' from One Communities stakeholders to a more strategic community development approach that the Project champions is unclear at present. It seems that there needs to be more focus on building the partnerships between OC boards/committees/groups and NDVS and TTVS so that the outcomes of Objective 1 are strengthened. It is likely that this will support the strategic development of Project objective 4 as well. One participant to the OC survey said they had 'never heard' of the Project and although many responses to the OC survey and the wider Leadership survey suggested strong support for the local VCSE sector, there is some misunderstanding about the work and the Project. An up-to-date database of all OC members would support the Project, and conversations between the Project team and the OC groups/committees showing the links between their local priorities and the Project objectives.

The lived experiences and professional backgrounds of Project staff – in education, training, and community development – has supported community engagement in the Project. It has created a strong foundation for understanding and responding to diverse community needs and priorities. The Project team are aware of significant gaps in community representation in the OCs and within partnership structures locally. Youth voices, particularly those aged 12 to 20, often are absent from partnership discussions and decision-making processes. Ethnic minority and Global Majority communities remain underrepresented, as are groups supporting individuals with special educational needs or disabilities, local schools, nurseries, and smaller community organisations. Other challenges to engagement have been geographic isolation and transport limitations. These are significant barriers to community engagement in some areas – particularly affecting rural communities. Prioritising engagement with people in these groups needs to continue in Year 2 and can be supported through a contribution analysis approach (see final section).

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**OBJECTIVE 2: EMBEDDING LEARNING FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO INFORM AND ADAPT DELIVERY, WITH A FOCUS ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND SOLUTIONS IDENTIFIED BY COMMUNITY DEVELOPERS AND CONNECTORS.**

The National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Community Developers were embedded into the Project through learning, training and networking opportunities – see Table 1. The NOS outline the core competencies, values and processes required for effective Community Development practice in the UK. They serve as a benchmark for anyone in a community development role, whether paid or voluntary. The fundamental purpose of community development, according to the NOS, is to enable people to work collaboratively to bring about positive social change, social justice, and equality.

**Table 1. National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Community Development**

<b>1. Understand and Practise Community Development</b>
This is the core area that underpins all others. It involves integrating the values into practice, understanding your role and its boundaries, and committing to reflective practice and continuous professional development.
<b>2. Understand and Engage with Communities</b>
This focuses on the ability to get to know a community, build relationships, and facilitate research and consultation to help people identify their assets, needs, and priorities.
<b>3. Group Work and Collective Action</b>
This area covers the skills needed to support community groups to work together effectively. It includes facilitating group development, managing conflict, supporting collective action for social change, and fostering community leadership.
<b>4. Collaborative and Cross-Sectoral Working</b>
This involves building and maintaining effective relationships between communities and external bodies, such as public agencies and other organisations, to ensure community voices are heard and can influence decision-making.
<b>5. Community Learning for Social Change</b>
This competency focuses on creating opportunities for shared learning. It's about helping communities to reflect on their experiences, learn from their actions, and use that learning to inform future strategies for change.
<b>6. Governance and Organisational Development</b>
This area relates to supporting communities in developing appropriate structures and processes to manage their own organisations and initiatives effectively and sustainably.

The ethos of the NOS has been embedded into the Project in Year 1 – through reflective practice, workshops, networking, training, discussion opportunities – and this has been well received by Project staff. The NOS were also introduced into the CD/CC monthly reporting – encouraging reflection on practice as well as Project delivery. Although the NOS aligned processes and practices have been welcomed by the majority of the CD/CCs, some people have expressed concern over the time spent in meetings rather than being *'on the ground'*. The difficulty of carrying out community development whilst also carrying out deep reflective practice and reporting has been frustrating for some staff.

CDs/CCs demonstrated a lot of commitment to embedding learning and continuous improvement throughout Year 1, even when reporting processes were challenging. Core competencies were renewed and strengthened in critical areas including professional boundaries, safeguarding protocols and digital skills. Beyond foundational skills, CDs/CCs carried out additional training, e.g. advanced certifications in digital literacy through the Cosmic programme, Mental Health First Aid, Domestic Violence Awareness and specialised facilitation techniques.

The training in, and adoption of, quiet-voices techniques, specifically designed to engage seldom-heard community members and ensure more inclusive participation, has received positive feedback from CC/CDs who have described ways in which they have been using it in their work.

The CD/CC survey findings reveal that greater clarity in their role requirements and responsibilities has occurred over the course of Year 1. This improvement suggests that the embedding of reflective practice and experiential learning, alongside the development of more sophisticated understanding of community development practice, is helping to meet Objective 2. However, it must be noted that only 5 CD/CCs completed the end of Year 1 external evaluation survey – possibly due to workload and annual leave, but perhaps also reflecting the viewpoint previously expressed related to burden of reporting in the Project. Data from the CD/CC survey, staff interviews and Ripple Mapping Workshop showed that collaborative learning during Year 1 has been welcomed and successful. The peer-to-peer

opportunities within the newly established NDVS TTVS Community Developers group and the wider Northern Community Developers Network (35+ members) have provided structured spaces to share practice, learning and reflection. This is likely to have contributed to the overall improvement in role confidence and clarity, particularly for those who were new to post and/or a CD/CC role. Evaluation data show that people valued shared learning opportunities.

*Ripple Mapping - Good to have time focus on the work that we have been undertaking over the past year and deep dive into it. (CD/CC Survey response)*

*[Feedback for Ripple Mapping] Really refreshing to be in a group where it was interactive, fun and everyone could communicate openly. Rather than just sitting and listening for hours, which isn't engaging. It was almost team building yesterday too, as you see the links/common threads in our roles too. (CD/CC Evaluation Email Feedback)*

*Networking - having more opportunities to be in the same room as co-workers and agencies has improved knowledge, connection and joint working. (CD/CC Survey response)*

*[What's going well in the project?] Information sharing, collaborations joining the dots and filling holes in provision. (CD/CC Survey response)*

Community Developers demonstrated adaptive practice by developing innovative approaches to the persistent challenge of learning from those who are engaging in activities/events, as well as those who are not. The use of short surveys as conversation starters exemplified how traditional consultation methods were adapted to create more engaging and accessible forms of community dialogue. The mixed-method approach to outreach reflected learning about the need for diverse engagement strategies to reach different community segments effectively.

*The word is spreading about what we do – there is more awareness of our roles out in the wider community. Our value within the community is being recognised more now. (CD/CC Survey response)*

*‘Working to find the gaps in provision and helping to set up groups where there’s a need. I have organised a Thriving Together Community Health & Wellbeing event tomorrow which should bring the community together to celebrate the reopening of the leisure centre after a major refurb. It’s an opportunity to see what is happening locally and some good networking opportunities. We will be promoting volunteering opportunities available locally and engaging with the community with our survey to see what is important to them’. (CD/CC Survey)*

The Ripple Mapping workshop showed how CD/CCs are actively moving from delivery to learning. Staff described developing evaluation practice, using case studies and creating space to reflect on their own capacity. Some CD/CCs reported increased trust, confidence and support from line managers, which has allowed them to plant seeds of change and extract community needs more effectively.

Feedback from Project staff also shows that challenges remain for Project delivery – particularly related to ways in which community development needs time to develop and grow organically.

*‘Conversation with everyday people is invaluable. This is often underplayed but it is through visiting other groups and as above that connections can be made and development comes off the back. there is more to community development than just putting on an activity.’ (CC/CD Survey response)*

CDs/CCs have highlighted the need for collaborative approaches to meeting people’s needs in communities – co-developing work with meaningful outcomes that genuinely capture the impact of community development. The diversity of professional backgrounds among

participants, including education, training, and community development expertise, provided a strong foundation for peer-to-peer learning.

Partnerships have provided valuable opportunities for networking and collaboration, enabling knowledge sharing and mutual learning across organisations and sectors. For example, the Community Connector for the Woodyard Project attended the Ripple Mapping Workshop and shared information about Reading for Wellbeing. The Northern Community Developers Network meetings and NDVS TTVS Community Developers meeting also give opportunities for shared learning. The Project management team are planning to further embed reflective practice in Year 2 and develop targets that align closely with learning about community priorities from Year 1, building on the approach used in the Barnstaple OC and The Woodyard Project.

Digital tools were increasingly used to coordinate efforts and facilitate learning, though feedback on specific platforms was mixed, indicating the need for continued adaptation and improvement in digital engagement approaches. The Year 1 Project Report mentions the possibility of a digital impact reporting tool. We have seen many of these tools in action and they often are not suitable for projects with the space and budget of this one. However, there is a new tool that is free for charities and CICs which may be worth exploring – [Plinth](#).

The external evaluation survey of the North Devon Leadership Hub showed that communication gaps and siloed working practices are considered to be persistent challenges that hinder effective learning and practice improvement. These can prevent organisations from sharing insights and adapting successful approaches, limiting the overall effectiveness of partnership working beyond the Project and wider Community Developer Network. There is an identified need for more systematic approaches to knowledge retention and transfer within partnership structures across the areas, which the Project could support with under Objective 2.

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**OUTCOME 3: STRENGTHENING THE VCSE SECTOR (INCLUDING BOTH NDVS AND TTVS) THROUGH SUPPORTING THIRD-SECTOR ORGANISATIONS, STAFF, AND VOLUNTEERS; SHARING BEST PRACTICE; SUPPORTING NEW NETWORKS, ACTIVITIES AND ORGANISATIONS.**

As outlined in the evaluation of Objective 2, (above) the collaborative learning environment among CDs/CCs and the wider CD Network has been very positive for learning. It has also strengthened the sector, with new opportunities for sharing best practice and learning from each other. External evaluation data show that the peer networking opportunities from Project have become a resource for mutual support, knowledge sharing and collective problem-solving. There is also evidence that the Project has strengthening individual organisations' capacity through shared expertise.

CD/CCs actively support third-sector organisations through their convening role, bringing together diverse local groups for signature events and ongoing collaborative initiatives. The numerous health/wellbeing events, youth events and networking events, demonstrated how CD/CCs could unite different VCSE organisations around shared objectives while maintaining their individual identities and missions – something that has been highlighted as crucial in a competitive funding landscape. CD/CC led projects in Year 1 have also exemplified how they can support volunteer development and retention, contributing to the broader VCSE sector's sustainability by building reliable volunteer bases and developing volunteer management expertise.

There is significant potential for cross-area learning and model replication if the learning from Year 1 of the Project is optimised. Successful initiatives like the *WOW Wellbeing for Women* group and the *Sustainable Food Hub* represent transferable models that could strengthen VCSE provision across different geographic contexts. However, evaluation feedback suggests that there is still a need for more systematic approaches to best practice sharing, possibly with for regular site visits and more shared learning events to accelerate peer learning and enable successful model replication.

The project has made significant contributions to building capacity and resilience in the VCSE sector. New CD/CC roles have expanded coverage and improved to support capacity in

more areas. There is evidence that collaboration across VCSE organisations has led to stronger funding bids, better partnerships and reduced duplication – the collaborations and collegiality demonstrated in the Leadership Hub is one significant example.

The Ripple Mapping workshop discussions revealed that collaboration and knowledge-sharing between CD/CCs in NDVS and TTVS is valued. Staff described an increase in partnerships, joint delivery and connections that help meet the needs of communities more effectively. Volunteer leadership is also growing, with reports of new volunteers motivated to take on leadership of groups and activities. Project staff said they are often surprised *‘how many amazing volunteers there are’* and how much is already happening locally, though they also noted that communities are not always aware of the range of support available. This highlights the need for improved signposting and communication – which NDVS and TTVS are in an optimal position to do and are already growing in this area.

Feedback from Year 1 confirmed that relationships with other organisations, such as social prescribers, have strengthened CD/CC work. The Northern Devon Inclusive Communities Framework has provided a useful way of supporting people facing complex challenges and linking them into community activity. The focus on building on what already exists rather than duplicating effort is important and will be welcomed by the wider VCSE community and networks.

The external evaluation survey of the North Devon Leadership Hub confirms that the VCSE sector is regarded as being built on a robust and deeply committed foundation.

Respondents rated the sector’s performance as generally “OK” to “Quite well,” attributing this success to the high level of commitment and resourcefulness of its individuals and organisations. This intrinsic passion translates into a strong culture of partnership, with networking opportunities and collaborative projects frequently cited as key strengths. This collaborative spirit is supported by dedicated practitioner roles, as evidenced by the high regard that is given to the CD/CC role. CD/CCs are valued by the wider VCSE sector for enabling local engagement and organisational growth.

*‘They are helpful.’ (ND Leadership Hub Survey response)*

*'It is important to keep in contact [with CDs] to find out about other initiatives that could benefit us and that we could help.'* (ND Leadership Hub Survey response)

Despite its strengths, the VCSE sector faces significant structural and operational challenges that limit its potential and sustainability. The most pressing weakness is the pervasive pressure of limited funding and capacity.

*'Since Austerity stripped away support services in the public sector, the third sector has been filling the gaps with minimal funding and short term contracts. Sticking plaster remedial work. More thought needs to be placed on funding long term aims that span generational timespans rather than a one year/two year purpose.'* (CD/CC Survey response)

This highlights that intense funding competition and instability create an environment of uncertainty, undermining long-term planning. This financial precarity is compounded by reported critical volunteer shortages and burnout, a systemic issue that directly threatens the operational capacity of many organisations.

*'I don't think statutory organisations really recognise the value brought to communities by the VCSE sector, and that funding/contracting to make it happen is hard-won.'* (ND Leadership Hub Survey response)

Volunteer recruitment and retention is another frequently cited challenge across the VCSE sector. This challenge directly impacts organisational capacity and sustainability, limiting the ability of VCSE organisations to maintain consistent service delivery and respond to growing community needs. The challenge was compounded by time and capacity constraints that affected organisations' ability to provide adequate volunteer support and development opportunities. Rural organisations often face additional barriers related to transport and access issues that further complicated volunteer recruitment and retention efforts. Some external evaluation respondents feel that these problems are exacerbated by weaknesses in VCSE organisational governance, with respondents noting that leadership transitions without proper handover and a need for consistent follow-through are significant concerns. Operationally, while collaboration is a strength, challenges of siloed

working and duplication of efforts persist, preventing the sector from achieving its maximum collective impact.

Externally, the sector's relationship with statutory partners presents a major challenge. The results of the ND Leadership Hub Survey suggests that people who work in the VCSE sector feel that statutory bodies undervalue the contributions of the VCSE sector, often expecting it to fill service gaps without providing adequate support or understanding.

*'Within the smaller parishes. Town, District and County Council have a good understanding of [name of charity]. The NHS now also has a good understanding of [name of charity]. This knowledge and understanding does not lead to funding.'* (ND Leadership Hub Survey response)

There is a strong need for NDVS and TTVS in supporting the VCSE sector – however, there are competing needs and demands, with priorities not always being clear due to differing purposes and competition for very limited funding. The lack of funding and impact of years of austerity weakens the sector's position and strains its limited resources, particularly when community need is high and organisations often are trying to deliver in rural areas with dispersed populations.

The quiet voice approach that has been developed in Year 1 is strategic and necessary as multiple external evaluation datapoints have noted the absence of voices from key demographics in influencing the sector – including youth, ethnic minority communities, and disability groups. This indicates that the VCSE sector is not fully reflective of the communities it serves which limits the sector's inclusivity and reach but also hampers its ability to advocate effectively for everyone – something which is increasingly important to demonstrate to funders.

There have been learning opportunities related to funding delivered through the Project in Year 1 – workshops, discussion groups, online support – and external evaluation participants identified significant potential for enhancing sector strength through joint funding applications. This approach has been successful for a few organisations locally (this Project is

an example!) and this can reduce unhelpful competition and increase overall sector capacity. This collaborative trend is likely to be significant strength, demonstrating coordinated and strategic approaches to community development.

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#### OUTCOME 4: USING COMMUNITY INTELLIGENCE TO INFLUENCE SYSTEM CHANGE AND DECISION-MAKING, WHILST PROMOTING THE IMPACT (INCLUDING PREVENTION) THE SECTOR MAKES.

This outcome focuses on using community intelligence to influence decision-making and promote the impact, including preventative work, that the VCSE sector delivers. External evaluation suggests that this objective is likely to be the most challenging for the Project team because of multifaceted structural constraints, despite considerable Project team effort and perseverance.

CD/CCs have demonstrated strong capabilities in gathering and using community feedback to build connections and deliver activities. Both the CD/CCs and the Project management team already have, and are developing, opportunities to represent local perspectives within operations committees, wider strategic partnerships, and statutory service boards. However, within a context of high need, limited funding, and a competitive funding environment, it is essential that the Project can robustly evidence both how community voices and lived experiences are systematically captured and the ways in which community development contributes to the outcomes prioritised by statutory organisations. This evidence is crucial to strengthening influence and driving wider system change.

Several systemic and structural barriers are currently limiting the Project's ability to achieve this outcome. A key challenge lies in the mismatch between short-term funding cycles and the long-term nature of community development objectives. The ambition to achieve systemic change requires sustained investment yet grants and contract structures do not currently support this. The types of contracts and remuneration packages related to community development work are also a barrier – as noted by CD/CCs themselves during the external evaluation. This can increase staff turnover and the risk of staff burnout given the high and constant level of need in communities.

Geographic coverage presents further challenges. CDs working across large rural areas are constrained by limited travel budgets, restricting their ability to maintain consistent engagement with strategic partnerships. Even when individual CDs demonstrate strong capability and commitment, these structural limitations reduce the Project's potential to achieve sustained influence.

Despite these multifaceted challenges, Year 1 of the Project has seen some encouraging progress in developing influence through community intelligence. CD/CCs have identified seven emerging priority themes based on local feedback, which have been shared with the Northern Devon Community and Learning Steering Group. A new strategic group has also been established to support CD work. Workshops highlighted positive examples where community intelligence has shaped decision-making. Some community groups, such as Wellbeing Wednesdays, have grown to the point where they operate independently and are increasingly recognised as legitimate voices in local discussions. However, discussion at the Ripple Mapping workshop suggested that youth voices, in particular, remain overshadowed by professionals.

External evaluation data highlights the VCSE sector's mixed experiences when engaging with statutory organisations. There is a general feeling that statutory bodies undervalue VCSE contributions, often expecting the sector to fill service gaps without offering adequate support or recognition. While some improvements were noted in referrals and collaborative working, there are still significant gaps in mutual understanding, particularly regarding the VCSE sector's role and capacity across North Devon and Torridge. Issues around unclear communication and service transitions continue to create inefficiencies and confusion, affecting both service users and delivery partners.

Partnerships are recognised as having significant potential to influence statutory services and resource allocation, but their effectiveness remains uneven. Limited involvement from statutory partners with decision-making power, such as health and transport authorities,

restricts the scope for influence. Within partnerships, follow-through on agreed actions is inconsistent, undermining credibility and slowing progress. Power imbalances persist, with statutory organisations often holding greater influence than VCSE representatives and community voices. This imbalance particularly affects the representation of marginalised groups, including young people and Global Majority communities, reducing the authenticity and effectiveness of community input in strategic forums.

To strengthen the Project's influence and maximise its impact, several strategic actions are recommended:

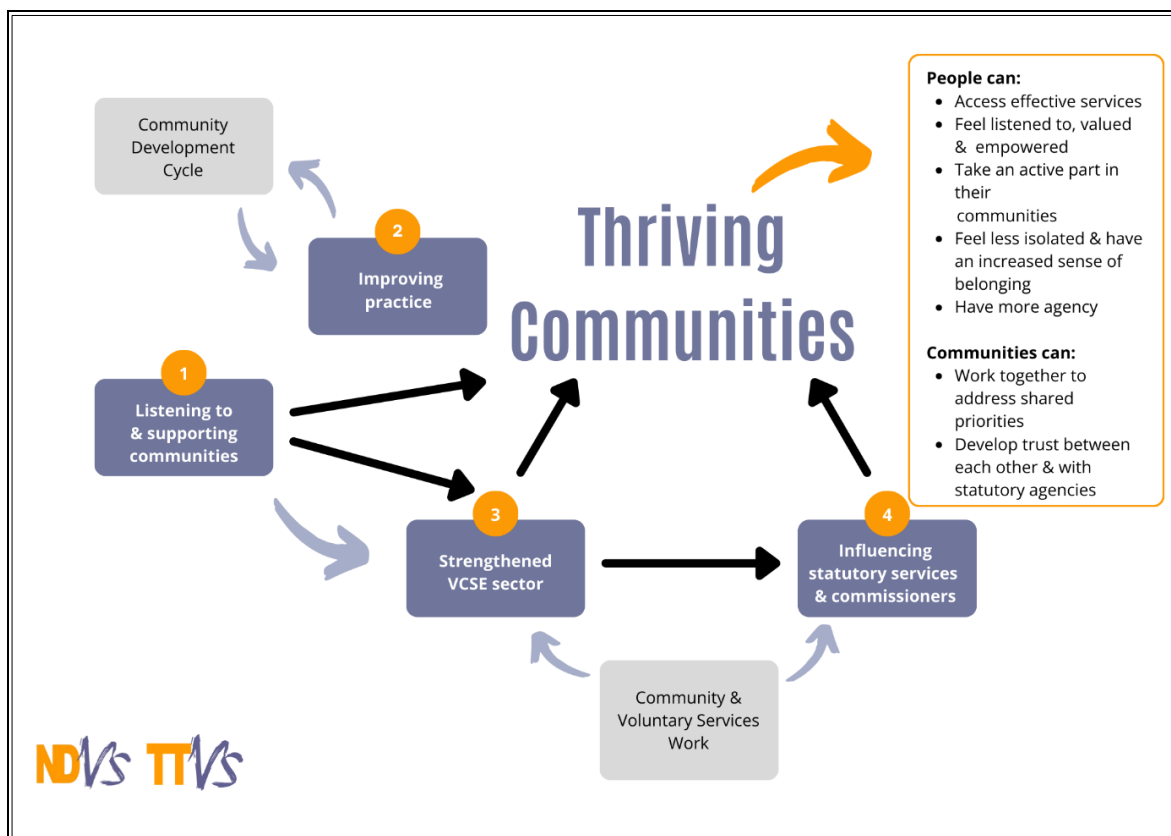
- Continue to explore new collaborative approaches (e.g. Woodyard and ND Inclusive Communities Framework) to delivery and shared learning.
- Increased learning from the Poverty Truth Commission in Ilfracombe about the ways in which lived experience has fed directly into conversations with decision-makers
- Targeted efforts to strengthen representation and inclusion in OCs.
- Partnerships should prioritise outreach to underrepresented groups, particularly young people aged 12–20, ethnic minority and Global Majority communities, and individuals with special educational needs or disabilities.
- Culturally appropriate engagement methods and improved transport and digital access would help broaden participation, especially in rural areas.
- Establishing stronger systems for knowledge retention and transfer across the sector would preserve organisational learning and maintain continuity over time.
- Facilitating cross-area site visits and shared learning events would accelerate peer learning, enable replication of effective practices, and strengthen collective influence.
- Continuing to encourage and coordinate joint funding applications would reduce competition and increase sector capacity
- Continuing to coordinate efforts to improve volunteer recruitment and retention would address persistent challenges, particularly in rural contexts.
- Strengthening relationships with statutory partners through clearer role definitions, improved communication platforms, and increased involvement of statutory bodies in partnership activities would build trust and enhance collective impact.

- Sustaining leadership continuity within CD/CC roles will be particularly important to maintain relationships and strategic influence over time.

## THEORY OF CHANGE

In this section, the analysis of internal and external evaluation data has been used to develop the revised Theory of Change for the Project. The revised Project objectives and intended outcomes for people and communities are shown in Figure 3. This simple diagram could be helpful in showcasing to staff, partners, stakeholders and communities how all of the Project work fits together – as well as for streamlining the Project deliverables, i.e. unless the work clearly relates to Objectives 1-4 and the intended outcomes, it is beyond the scope of the current Project.

**Figure 3. Revised Project objectives and intended outcomes for people and communities**



The initial Project Theory of Change (developed by the Project team) has been revised by the external evaluators to align with the simplified Project objectives. At this stage, the Theory of Change has been broken down by Objective as it our recommendation that the

Project team really develop the learning from Year 1 to align it each Objective as this will support the Project alignment and streamlining process through contribution analysis. An overall Theory of Change can then be developed out of this learning by December 2025. It should be noted that this Theory of Change relates directly to the community development work. We are aware that some stakeholders may like to build a wider Theory of Change that includes impact on health and wellbeing and other statutory objectives. This can be done over time, but within the timescale of this project, we believe it is important to get things right for the community level and project objectives.

### Objective 1: Engaging Communities – Listening to & Supporting Communities

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short-term Outcomes	Medium-term Outcomes	Long-term Impact
<b>Funding from National Lottery and match funders</b>  <b>Community Developers &amp; Connectors</b>  <b>One Communities infrastructure</b>  <b>Strategic partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use the Community Development Cycle to engage residents, groups, and communities</li> <li>Use participatory approaches to identify priorities, assets, strengths, and gaps</li> <li>Support people to take collective action on what matters most</li> <li>Actively include youth, marginalised groups, and quieter voices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of people engaged</li> <li>Priorities and gaps identified collectively</li> <li>Community-led action plans co-produced</li> <li>Stories of change captured</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People feel listened to and valued</li> <li>Increased confidence and agency</li> <li>Reduced isolation and stronger sense of belonging</li> <li>More diverse voices represented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communities take ownership of priorities</li> <li>Stronger collaboration between residents and partners</li> <li>Thriving, resilient, empowered communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greater community resilience and equity</li> <li>Improved wellbeing and social cohesion</li> <li>Stronger collective voice at local and regional levels</li> </ul>

## Objective 2: Embedding Learning – Improving Practice

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short-term Outcomes	Medium-term Outcomes	Long-term Impact
<p><b>Evaluation frameworks and reporting tools</b></p> <p><b>Reflective practice sessions</b></p> <p><b>Community Developers' insights and lived experience</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embed structured reflective practice</li> <li>• Collect and share community intelligence</li> <li>• Adapt delivery in real-time based on insights</li> <li>• Share learning with partners and stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lessons from engagement documented and shared</li> <li>• Reflective practice sessions completed</li> <li>• Reports and intelligence produced</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People experience more relevant, responsive support</li> <li>• Residents see their feedback acted on</li> <li>• Greater trust between communities and organisations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Developers grow confidence in shaping approaches</li> <li>• Best practice shared across VCSE sector</li> <li>• Delivery continuously improves based on learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A culture of continuous improvement drives better outcomes</li> <li>• Greater equity of service provision</li> <li>• Lived experience consistently shapes delivery</li> </ul>

## Objective 3: Strengthening the VCSE Sector

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short-term Outcomes	Medium-term Outcomes	Long-term Impact
<p><b>CVS capacity and leadership</b></p> <p><b>Access to training, mentoring, and peer learning</b></p> <p><b>Partnerships with VCSE networks</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support VCSE organisations, volunteers, and staff through training and mentoring</li> <li>• Share evaluation tools, best practice, and insights</li> <li>• Facilitate peer networks and cross-sector learning</li> <li>• Foster new grassroots groups and initiatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of organisations supported</li> <li>• Peer learning events delivered</li> <li>• Resources and toolkits shared</li> <li>• New groups formed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People benefit from more coordinated, accessible support</li> <li>• More community-led activities available locally</li> <li>• Stronger pathways to participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• VCSE organisations demonstrate greater confidence, skills, and resilience</li> <li>• Peer networks reduce duplication and enable collaboration</li> <li>• New groups and activities meet emerging needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A strong, sustainable, collaborative VCSE sector</li> <li>• Improved reach and quality of services for communities</li> <li>• Preventative impact recognised by funders and statutory partners</li> </ul>

## Objective 4: Influencing Statutory Organisations and Strategic Partnerships

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short-term Outcomes	Medium-term Outcomes	Long-term Impact
<p><b>Community intelligence from grassroots engagement</b></p> <p><b>Established relationships with system leaders</b></p> <p><b>Access to decision-making forums</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use community intelligence to influence statutory priorities</li> <li>• Advocate for community-led solutions</li> <li>• Demonstrate preventative impact of VCSE sector</li> <li>• Actively participate in cross-sector boards and partnerships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence briefings produced</li> <li>• Number of statutory forums attended</li> <li>• Policy recommendations submitted</li> <li>• Community intelligence integrated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People’s lived experience shapes funding, policies, and services</li> <li>• More equitable and responsive statutory provision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• VCSE intelligence integrated into commissioning and strategy design</li> <li>• Stronger VCSE voice within decision-making structures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systems and strategies reflect lived experience</li> <li>• Sustainable long-term funding for community-led initiatives</li> <li>• Stronger, fairer, more collaborative systems</li> </ul>

### OPTIMISING PROJECT EVIDENCE: CONTRIBUTION ANALYSIS

We recommend using the Theory of Change with the process set out in Table 2 to help to ensure that the evaluation techniques (outlined in the Project Evaluation Framework) continue to support the Project in meeting its objectives (particularly techniques 3 and 5) through optimising the data and evidence the Project team is collecting. The decision-making process outlined in Table 2 will help to ensure robust evidence gathering and analysis - showcasing the contribution of community development which is crucial for its sustainability and legacy in North Devon and Torridge.

**Table 2. Theory of Change in Practice Process**

Stage	Key Questions	What to Capture	How It Links to Potential Funding
<p>Stage 1: Justification (<i>Why this activity?</i>)</p>	<p>Why is this activity needed?</p> <p>Which Theory of Change outcome(s) does it support?</p> <p>What problem or opportunity are we addressing?</p> <p>Which statutory/corporate/VCSE priorities does this align with?</p> <p>What evidence will we need to collect to demonstrate impact?</p>	<p>Named ToC outcome(s)</p> <p>Rationale based on data, local need, or community voice</p> <p>Relevant policy or CSR priorities</p> <p>Initial evidence plan</p>	<p>Starts the contribution story by linking the activity to intended outcomes and defining evidence requirements from the outset.</p>
<p>Stage 2: Optimisation (<i>Who &amp; what's needed?</i>)</p>	<p>Who are the key partners, participants, and influencers?</p> <p>What resources are needed?</p> <p>What's the delivery timescale and milestones?</p> <p>Who is responsible for capturing data and learning?</p> <p>What external data (e.g. NHS, CSR reports) could strengthen evidence?</p>	<p>Partner/stakeholder list</p> <p>Roles and responsibilities</p> <p>Delivery timeline</p> <p>External datasets to request</p>	<p>Ensures strategic partnerships are embedded early and maximises opportunities to integrate statutory and corporate insight into your evaluation.</p>
<p>Stage 3: Methodology (<i>How will we deliver &amp; measure success?</i>)</p>	<p>What actions will we take?</p> <p>How will we measure progress and success (KPIs)?</p> <p>What data sources will we use?</p> <p>How will we gather both quantitative and qualitative evidence?</p> <p>What are the risks or assumptions that might affect outcomes?</p>	<p>Activity plan</p> <p>Agreed KPIs and metrics</p> <p>Evidence sources and tools (e.g. surveys, case studies, referral data)</p> <p>Risks and assumptions</p>	<p>Directly connects measurement to ToC outcomes and sets up a mixed-methods approach for funders.</p>
<p>Stage 4: Assessment</p>	<p>What were the outcomes? (for who, how, why, when)</p>	<p>Completed Contribution Analysis table:</p>	<p>Builds a credible contribution story for statutory and</p>

<i>(What have we learned?)</i>	<p>How do we know these outcomes occurred? (evidence)</p> <p>What contribution did this activity make?</p> <p>How strong is the evidence?</p> <p>What gaps remain and how will we address them?</p>	<p>Outcome achieved? evidence collected</p> <p>Type and strength of evidence</p> <p>Gaps and next steps</p>	<p>corporate funders and identifies where stronger evidence is needed.</p>
<p>Stage 5: Communication</p> <p><i>(Who needs to know &amp; why?)</i></p>	<p>Who needs to see these outcomes?</p> <p>How should we communicate them?</p> <p>What formats will be most effective for each audience?</p> <p>What insights can we share to influence policy, funding, and practice?</p> <p>What messages or stories will resonate with corporate vs statutory funders?</p>	<p>Tailored ‘insight products’</p> <p>1-page funder briefs</p> <p>Community change stories</p> <p>Social value summaries</p> <p>Infographics</p> <p>Agreed dissemination channels</p>	<p>Ensures findings are shared strategically, maximising influence, visibility, and alignment with funder priorities.</p>

## EXTERNAL EVALUATION PROJECT LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section summarises key learning from Year 1 of the Project and provides evidence-informed recommendations for enhancing delivery and evaluation in Year 2. Organised by the project’s four core objectives, it summarises what is working well, identifies where improvements are needed, and outlines next steps to strengthen both practice and influence.

**Objective 1: ENGAGING** people in communities of place or shared need to identify priorities, assets, strengths, and gaps – and to support them in taking collective relevant action.

Effective engagement is most successful when it is inclusive, representative and rooted in priorities defined by communities themselves. However, youth voices, marginalised groups,

and quieter voices remain underrepresented in some OC areas. CD/CCs play an enabling role, yet their impact is not always visible to OC members, partners or funders.

## Recommendations

To increase impact, reach and equity in Year 2:

1. Strengthen Representation and Inclusivity
  - Conduct a review of OC group memberships.
  - Develop targeted engagement strategies for seldom-heard voices, particularly young people and marginalised groups.
2. Showcase Project Outcomes More Effectively
  - Share stories of change and examples of inclusive engagement with both internal and external audiences more frequently and through diverse means (social media, podcasts, newspapers, keynotes, meetings, workshops, policy briefings, blogs) – and repurpose existing content.
  - Highlight the enabling role and ripple effects of CDs and CCs as much as possible.
3. Focus on Shared Priorities
  - Co-develop area-specific engagement priorities based on Year 1 learning and lived experience.
  - Provide guidance to CD/CCs to ensure delivery remains community-led rather than activity-driven.

Objective 2: Embedding LEARNING from community engagement to inform and adapt delivery, with a focus on the lived experiences, challenges, and solutions identified by Community Developers and Connectors.

Valuable learning emerged in Year 1, particularly around co-production, relationship-building and inclusive methods. However, these are not applied consistently across all areas. Data collection varies, limiting the project's ability to assess what works and why.

## Recommendations

To embed a culture of reflective practice and data-informed adaptation.

1. Establish a Structured “Learning Loop”
  - Build on the success of the CD/CC reflective practice workshop and Network meetings by integrating evaluation findings from Year 1 into focused themes and ongoing delivery planning.
2. Strengthen Data and Evidence
  - Redesign reporting templates to align with the four revised objectives.
  - Build staff confidence through training in monitoring and evaluation.
  - Improve consistency across areas by capturing both quantitative outcomes and qualitative stories of change.
3. Focus on What’s Working
  - Use Year 1 data to refine strategies for engaging quiet voices.
  - Streamline activity to prioritise high-impact actions with clear evidence of value and potential for funding.

Objective 3: STRENGTHENING the VCSE sector (including both CVs) through supporting third-sector organisations, staff, and volunteers; sharing best practice; supporting new networks, activities and organisations.

Cross-sector partnerships are valuable but not yet fully activated. CD/CCs are often pulled into delivery roles, limiting their ability to build strategic relationships. Furthermore, learning and successes from one area are not consistently shared across the wider VCSE ecosystem.

Recommendations

To build a more connected, confident and resilient VCSE sector:

1. Strengthen Strategic Partnerships
  - Develop a joint delivery and engagement plan between NDVS, TTVS and OC groups.
  - Reduce operational workload for CD/CCs to free up capacity for network-building.
2. Share Best Practice Across Areas

- Introduce time in the reflective practice workshops for ‘Good Practice Exchange’
- Facilitate more peer learning sessions between staff and volunteers.

Objective 4: Using community intelligence to INFLUENCE system change and decision-making, whilst promoting the impact (including prevention) the sector makes.

Community insights are beginning to influence strategic discussions, but progress is uneven. While the VCSE sector's role in prevention and wellbeing is widely acknowledged, there remains a need for robust evidence to secure investment and formal recognition from statutory partners.

#### Recommendations

To increase influence and sustainability:

1. Use Community Intelligence Strategically
  - Strengthen mechanisms for feeding insight into statutory and strategic forums.
  - Equip CD/CCs, all NDVS and TTVS staff, and OC Members with accessible impact stories and headline data.
2. Build a Compelling Evidence Base
  - Develop a shared framework for capturing outcomes, social value, and economic impact.
  - Use mixed-method evidence (case studies, data, lived experience) to influence commissioning.
3. Position the Project as a Leader in System Change
  - Build on initiatives such as the Poverty Truth Commission to challenge power dynamics.
  - Consolidate OC's visibility and reputation as a trusted system partner.

## CROSS-CUTTING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YEAR 2

- Provide clearer guidance to CD/CCs on aligning delivery to local priorities.
- Ensure internal communication reinforces shared understanding of revised project objectives.
- Redesign monitoring tools and reporting templates to align with revised Project objectives.
- Embed a Theory of Change-based approach to focus learning on ‘what’s working and why’ across the Project.
- Use the Theory of Change for strategic Project evidence development and consider contribution analysis for internal evaluation.
- Consider a Contribution Analysis workshop for staff and partners to strengthen reflective and adaptive practice.
- Consider prioritising fewer, community needs driven community development approaches and initiatives that are underway – ones which align with wider priorities in order to increase funding opportunities.